

Hip-Hop Goes Beyond Just a Beat

Written by NiKKi ID1456
Sunday, 29 May 2005 08:32 -

An estimate of more than 200 people turned out for Rochell D. "Ro Deezy" Hart's CD release party a few years ago.

But only three left with copies of her album, "P.I.M.P." Perhaps because Hart's interpretation of the word -- "Poetic Intellectual Making Progress" -- doesn't mesh with the version that travels radio airwaves and fills hip-hop and rap music store shelves.

"Kids naturally are going to follow whatever is the hype," the Portland writer and spoken word artist said. "It is up to us to shape that."

Hart had a receptive audience Saturday afternoon: the first Hip Hop Summit at Portland State University. More than 100 musicians, writers, educators and young people gathered to talk about harnessing the power of hip-hop.

They came to a few conclusions.

Mass-produced rap from artists such as 50 Cent and The Game doesn't reflect African American culture, or even the artists' reality in some cases. And a socially conscious breed of hip-hop that's blooming in Portland is much harder to spread as long as sex, drugs and violence sell.

Three panels dug into the issue during the event, organized by the Christian-influenced production group the Koinonia Project and PSU's Black Cultural Affairs Board. They celebrated with an evening of music, poetry and dancing.

When teens at the Blazers Boys and Girls Club write rhymes, they're cultured to pick provocative subjects that sell -- even if it's fiction, said Rob Ingram, program and teen director for the Northeast Portland nonprofit.

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As a hip-hop fan himself, he's turned to alternative sources such as BBC radio for his music. Ingram said there's a problem when Grammy-winning artist Kanye West, for example, is deemed alternative because his music addresses racial stereotypes and religion.

"I love hip-hop," Ingram said. "I grew up on it. But I can't just let them keep force-feeding me something I don't want."

Older participants reminisced about the early days of hip-hop, when graffiti, DJ'ing, rap and break-dancing gave African American artists a way to express themselves. As the rest of the nation caught on, they said, music executives distilled what sells and marginalized the rest of the hip-hop community.

It's hard to deny hip-hop's explosion into the mainstream.

As CD sales struggled in recent years, rap has been one bright spot for the music industry. Radio stations that used to stick to bubble-gum pop put hip-hop in the rotation. Teenagers mimic artists' styles, whether it's 50 Cent's gold chains or Nelly's bandage-as-accessory trend.

Enjoying the beat of a popular artist won't hurt anybody, panelists said Saturday, as long as listeners have a strong family and community network to show them it's just entertainment.

But the group found more energy in another idea: nurturing hip-hop Portland-style. Buy local CDs, they said, recommending artists such as the Lifesavas and Urban Truth. Go to shows. Request positive hip-hop from radio stations. Complain when they won't play it. Reconvene for another summit.

Hip-hop goes beyond just a beat to speed up the evening commute or dance to, participants said. They embraced music as a way to unify Portland's African American community and chip away at problems such as poverty and racial gaps in education.

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Panelists said one-on-one relationships should be the bridge between the civil rights generation and what they coined the hip-hop generation.

For retired teacher Geoffrey N. Brooks, that meant taking young people's advice and discovering he enjoyed music from West, Arrested Development and Christian hip-hop artists.

For De La Salle North Catholic High School sophomore Arya Morman, that means trading music with her grandmother. Morman takes to heart her grandma's concerns about women who "leave nothing to the imagination" on music videos; in exchange, her grandmother concedes there may be some merit to hip-hop.

Negativity in mainstream hip-hop doesn't mean it's time to give up, PSU psychology professor Dalton Miller-Jones said. He encouraged his audience to remember the pride African Americans felt when Joe Lewis boxed his way to victory or Althea Gibson won a tennis match.

The community could regain that sense of identity, Miller-Jones said. And it might just come in the form of a good beat and passionate lyrics.

"Hip-hop is that visceral voice again," he said. "It can be. It was."